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PERSEUS AND MEDUSA  
A WHITE ATTIC LEKYTHOS



WHITE ATTIC LEKYTHOS

AMONG the vases acquired by the Museum in 1906 one of the most important is a white lekythos, or oil-jug, with a scene representing the death of Medusa and the flight of Perseus. Its interest consists both in the treatment of the picture with which it is decorated and its technique.

The episode is taken from the well-known legend of Perseus, who, in consequence of a rash promise, was ordered by Polydektes, king of Seriphos, to fetch the head of the Gorgon Medusa. The details of the story are familiar enough—Perseus, at a loss how to set about his task, met Hermes, who promised that he and Athena would be his guides; he was first taken to the Graiai, the three sisters who had only one eye and one tooth between them, which he stole and would not give back until they had told him of the abode of the Nymphs. When he came to the Nymphs he was provided by them with winged shoes (*endromides*), a wallet (*kibisis*) and the cap of Hades. The first were to enable him to reach the home of the Gorgons, who lived on the further side of the ocean, at the uttermost bounds of the earth; into the wallet he was to put the head of the dread Medusa, since, if he gazed at it, he would be turned into stone; the cap of Hades would render him invisible and secure his escape from the pursuit of the other Gorgons, Medusa's sisters. Armed

with these possessions, he successfully performed his task and brought the head of Medusa back to Seriphos, where he turned King Polydektes into stone, as a punishment for his misdeeds.

This story is a popular subject for representation in Greek art, the favorite episodes selected being the actual cutting off of the Gorgon's head, the subsequent flight of Perseus, and, more rarely, his visit to the Nymphs. Of these the flight of Perseus occurs most frequently and is the one chosen for our lekythos. On one side lies Medusa, headless, but evidently not yet quite dead. With visible effort she is raising her body, supporting it with both hands. The slight contraction of the fingers and the bending of the right leg would show her agony, even if the blood were not gushing from her neck. From her neck also springs Pegasus, a winged horse, who is said to have ascended to the seat of the gods and carried the thunder and lightning of Zeus. Medusa wears a short chiton and winged shoes. She has a pair of large curved wings, which rise from her shoulder. Above Medusa Perseus is represented flying rapidly to the left. He is furnished with all the various gifts delivered to him by the Nymphs. On his outstretched right arm he is carrying the wallet with the head of Medusa, which is seen projecting from the rim; on his head he wears the *petasos*, Hades's cap; his feet are fitted with the winged shoes; and in his left hand he holds the sickle, or curved sword (*harpe*), which Athena is said to have given him.

When we consider that this picture was the work of a humble artist at a time when Greek art had not yet freed itself from the constraint of archaism, the simple directness and spirited rendering of the scene becomes very impressive. We have already mentioned the indications of pain in the drooping body of Medusa, which presuppose a close study of nature. With true feeling for effective contrast the artist varied the more stereotyped scheme of representing Pegasus merely by a horse's head or fore part and substituted a whole horse emerging from the dying monster's neck in the full vigor of new-

born strength. An entire horse was indeed represented in the well-known metope of Selinus, but there it is helpless in Medusa's arms, not springing from her neck. In the figure of Perseus the artist's ability to sketch a figure in swift motion found full opportunity. The Gorgons who pursued the hero are not represented, but there is no question that Perseus is in rapid flight. His arms are outspread as if to aid the quick motion of his winged feet; his cap is safely perched on the front of his head to prevent it being caught by the wind, and the ends of his mantle are swept behind in his rapid onrush. The filling of the field—the Gorgon in the centre and Pegasus and Perseus rushing in opposite directions—is satisfactory and contrasts favorably with earlier renderings, when, in accordance with the desire of making the picture as representative as possible, the scene was crowded with all the other participants—the two Gorgons, Athena and Hermes.

The method in which this lekythos is painted places it in that interesting class of white lekythoi, which is transitional between the earlier technique of painting the figures in black silhouette on a white ground (similar in every respect to the ordinary black-figured vases except that the ground

is painted white instead of being left in the red of the clay), and the late method in which the figures were drawn in outline and bright colors were gradually introduced for the draperies and other details. In this class, which came into vogue in the early part of the fifth century, B. C., the design either combines painting in silhouette and outline drawing or is painted entirely in fine black relief lines. In our lekythos the figures of Perseus and Pegasus are painted dark brown with incised details, while the body of Medusa is drawn wholly in outline. Vermilion is used, not as a wash, but for effectively touching up various details, such as the cap, winged shoes, and wallet of Perseus, as well as the border of his mantle, the girdle, shoes, and blood of the Gorgon, and the tail and neck of Pegasus; there is also a stripe of vermilion on Pegasus's wings and on the top of the wings of the Medusa; and again a touch of it in the centres of the palmettes on each side of the main scene. In accordance with the method prevalent for this class of lekythoi, the neck and shoulder of the vase, which form the background for the decorative designs (row of bars, lotos-buds, and maeander) are left red, while the ground for the design is covered with a brownish slip.

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PERSEUS AND MEDUSA  
PAINTING FROM WHITE ATTIC LEKYTHOS